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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ COOKING

30-Minute Vegetarian Indian Cookbook

Mridula Baljekar
The Ecco Press (July 1998)
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The authors of two of Ecco Press's 30-Minute Vegetarian series both have impressive credentials. Mridula Baljekar, author of the Indian cookbook, has written four cookbooks, hosts a British television show and was the editor of a British food magazine. Sarah Beattie, author of the Mexican cookbook, has two cookbooks to her name, has written for various newspapers and magazines, and was a BBC 'Mastercook' and 'Masterchef.' The expertise of both authors shines through in these simple, highly useful cookbooks.

Both books assume the dual challenges of writing recipes for non-meat eaters that can be prepared in 30 minutes. Both authors are British chefs, which can be a translation problem for American kitchens. Beattie's book works for an American audience very well, mostly because we are familiar with Mexican foods. Baljekar is a bit less successful than Beattie. Some ingredients in her Indian cookbook are an absolute mystery, as she offers no explanation of Quorn, soya mince, and dhanna jerra. Thankfully, this is kept to a minimum.

Paging through the Mexican cookbook, you can feel Beattie's presence. The recipes are nothing elaborate, but the simple, creative food combinations make the reader want to run into the kitchen and start cooking. Her sections on main courses, salsas and moles are especially good; the Quick Adobo, Quick Red Onion Preserve, and Chiles Rellenos all sound inviting.

Often vegetarian cookbooks substitute heavy cheese and high fat for the satisfaction of meat. Beattie doesn't overdo them. In fact some of her substitutions for meatiness and speed are delightful: sun-dried tomatoes for ham in Huevos Motolenos, oyster mushrooms for pork in Pepian (a corn-based stew) and instant polenta for cornmeal in Quick Tamales and Gorditas.

Baljekar excels with her side dishes. Vegetables Korma, Pumpkin Curry, and Cauliflower and Brocolli with Whole Spices all sound like winners. Indian cookery has several quick techniques and Baljekar makes full use of these as in her recipes for Tarka Dhal and Mixed Dhal with Spiced Butter. But the techniques are mostly top-of-the-stove with frying and sauteing topping the list. Reading through this cookbook, one gets the feeling that all the recipes are similar in method and only the seasonings and ingredients change.

In both books, quality is sometimes sacrificed for speed. Beattie makes use of canned evaporated milk and canned beans. Baljekar says that, "As far as vegetables are concerned, frozen are just as good as fresh and they save on preparation time." Frozen vegetables may be fast, but they don't deliver the same texture, taste or nutrition as fresh. And to obtain maximum nutrition, a vegetarian needs to eat fresh vegetables.

Both Mexico and India have cuisines that do fine with little or no meat, lending themselves very well to taste and satisfying vegetarian cookery. Cooks at any level will appreciate the ease and simplicity with which both authors construct their meals.

NANCY K. ALLEN (June 15, 1998)

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